

# **“NORTHERN AND TROUBLED, SOUTHERN AND PEACEFUL”: ABSENCE, PUNISHMENT, AND THE DISAPPEARED IN FILMS ON THE NORTH OF IRELAND**

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The title of this paper has its origins in a comment by the Dublin photographer David Farrell in his series of photographs *Innocent Landscapes*. Farrell's photographic collection recorded the digs at the 'Sites of the Disappeared.' His work witnessed the search for the absent. Invisibility is one aspect of the disappeared, who, despite having received extensive media coverage, have not been the focus of many films. Additionally, it is also a label that has itself been applied to the border between the North and South of Ireland (Cleary 98). If Farrell's preconceptions of the binary opposition of troubled North and peaceful South were challenged by the investigation of the disappeared, then so too are film audiences' perceptions of the border. For if the North really does represent a place that is unable to escape the troubles, and if the South is viewed as peaceful, where does the border lie?

This paper has emerged from my work investigating the nature of representations of the Irish border. I have selected a number of films that deal with aspects of the troubles, such as punishment, abduction and disappearance, and the impact of the border on their narratives. While the border does feature as a subtext in a number of films in Ireland, the chosen films interact with the concept of borders in different ways. In the course of this analysis, I will investigate the level of success that each cinematic approach has had in dealing with the subject.

The films that will be considered are Joe Comerford's *High Boot Benny* (1993), Vinny Murphy's *Accelerator* (2000), Johnny Gogan's *The Mapmaker* (2001), and Anne Crilly's short film *Limbo* (2001).

Joe Comerford is a director whose work has often challenged received notions of Ireland. In particular, the conflict in Northern Ireland had an influence on three feature films: *Traveller* (1982, written by Neil Jordan), *Reefer and the Model* (1987), and *High Boot Benny* (1993). These films deal with characters who are marginalised by social and political conditions in Ireland. The travellers in Comerford's film *Traveller* find an opportunity to engage in the black economy by smuggling goods across the border; but they are drawn into the 'troubles' after encountering a republican hitch-hiker, Clicky, and later the British army on the back roads of the North. The spectre of the border hangs over the characters in *Reefer and the Model*. The three main male characters are republicans who are hiding out in the West of Ireland due to previous paramilitary activities, while the 'model' of the title is a former prostitute who has re-

turned home pregnant from England. Despite their distance from the border, they cannot escape its influence. As Martin McLoone has observed, "Comerford's films are always deeply metaphorical, so that his marginalised characters and oblique narratives can be read as symbolic motifs of contemporary Ireland" (McLoone 134).

The portrayal of characters on the margins of society is visible again in *High Boot Benny*, where a troubled teenager finds refuge in 'the Mount,' an unconventional school located south of the border. Many of the ideas in the film deal directly with the issue of partition and the conflict that has emerged between warring tribes and factions. However, Brian McIlroy has noted that Comerford's interest in this particular type of institution has its roots in a personal story as his own father attended an alternative school that aimed to educate together children from different traditions. The school was shut down following pressure from the Free State government in the 1930s. McIlroy points out,

Comerford's interest in this subject arose from the fact that the closure of the school was symptomatic of an intellectual closure of many issues in Ireland, and not just the unresolved situation of partition. (McIlroy 83)

In *High Boot Benny* pressure is placed upon the 'free thinkers' from many groups in the cross-border community. Matron, the principal of 'the Mount,' is put under pressure to close her school, not only by the Catholic Church, but also by paramilitary groups and state forces (the British army and possibly the RUC) who cross the border from the North into the South. As a marginalised character (female, liberal, Protestant) located in the South she finds herself trapped between the various groups who have tried to exert differing forms of political, social, or moral control over the land. The sign outside the school reads, "Independence in education is a dangerous aspiration." It is equally applicable to Matron, whose ideas are perceived as threatening the uneasy status quo of life in this border area.

Matron, the 'silenced' priest Manley, and Benny form a dys-functional family (there is an incestuous tone in the relationship between the surrogate mother figure and Benny). As Kevin Rockett says, Comerford has a tendency in his representations to treat the breakdown of the conventional family "as a metaphor for the continuing conflict in Northern Ireland" (Rockett 133).

The director expresses his preoccupation with the Northern conflict in his politically-engaged cinematic approach; *High Boot Benny* is a film that reflects the director's concerns with alternative cinemas. He eschews a formulaic Hollywood approach in favour of a cinema that actively interrogates the consequences of the border and how the social, political and cultural repercussions of partition have impacted on the different characters in the film. Brian McIlroy, who has both critiqued and criticised Comerford's work, remarks that "tellingly, the film relies upon setting for much of its effects. The border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is used as a potent metaphor for the many divisions present in modern-day Ireland" (McIlroy 83).

The use of the border landscape in the film evokes a sense of wildness and brutality that is not as easily reconciled as the hard primitivism of other films representing Ireland, for example *Man of Aran* or *Ryan's Daughter* (see Gibbons 194-257). There is no escaping the bloody heritage of the land. Even in the opening scenes of the film, Benny daubs blood and entrails from trapped rabbits onto a border sign.<sup>1</sup> We see an incursion into the south by the British army as part of a surveillance operation. They seem to regard the border as invisible. The British soldiers are continually being watched by Benny, but it is not obvious if anyone else is watching. Shortly afterwards Benny discovers the body of the school caretaker, who has been killed by Republican paramilitaries.

An atmosphere of suspicion pervades the film. Benny is questioned by the RUC, but refuses to say anything. Later, after preventing two local girls (one a respectable doctor's daughter, the other the 'orphan' who works in the school) from taking blood to a wounded IRA man, he is punished by the IRA. It is a brutal and powerful scene. Comerford presents the image of a young man covered in tar and feathers, his arms outstretched and tied to posts. These images are intercut with Manley and the schoolboys singing and dancing like Native Americans. This subtext of the frontier mythology is interesting; by the end of the film Manley and Matron, the last of their tribe, have been wiped out because their ideas of tolerance and a liberal education pose a threat to those in power. It appears now that Benny is also an 'orphan.' Having witnessed the murder of the others, he is left with no choice but to follow the path of the 'orphan' and join the Republicans.

On the surface, Vinny Murphy's film *Accelerator* presents an entirely different filmic representation of Ireland than that of *High Boot Benny*. Its structure is based on the recognisable sub-genre of the 'road race movie' and was created with a specific audience in mind. Murphy wanted to make a film that moved beyond the idea of the 'troubles' to a fast-paced action-driven narrative that was youth-centred.

The film is about Johnny T, a joyrider from Belfast, who escapes to Dublin following threats from paramilitaries. He wants to get to Barcelona. To raise money, he agrees to take part in a road-race from Belfast to Dublin. Three Belfast couples and three Dublin couples head North to start the race. But they are all joyriders. This has implications for their prospects of success.

Observing armed British soldiers on their arrival in Belfast, one member of the Dublin gang remarks that it is 'another country,' but another retorts that it is 'another planet.' This idea of alien terrain is continued as the drivers steal six cars and leave Belfast.

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1 "Behind every rock, and just over every hill, one feels the presence of masked military or paramilitary gunmen engaged in an incoherent and inconclusive bloodbath (blood, entrapment and death permeate the film). This is a nightmarish border community of the imagination." (McLoone, 135)

The Northern couples have the advantage of local knowledge in this race and therefore Crunchie, one of the Dublin drivers, suggests they follow the Northerners 'to the border' so they can also get past any possible security checkpoints.

When the racers split up, the light-hearted energy of the earlier section of the film gives way to the tension of the race. It becomes obvious that there is more at stake than the pot of money in this challenge. The drivers are rebelling against laws and rules imposed by state control. However, state security forces are not the only threat to their success. It soon becomes apparent that this is not just a race to Dublin, but also a race past the border. It is not only an attempt to escape the malevolent atmosphere of the borderlands where the British army and Gardaí are constantly watching, but also to evade paramilitary groups whose own version of community policing involves delivering immediate justice.

The first victim in this territory is Crunchie, who naively asks some locals for directions to Dublin. He looks very young, has an obviously southern accent, yet is driving a car with Northern registration plates. When their suspicions are aroused they send him in the wrong direction, trap him in a cul-de-sac, and subsequently administer a punishment beating with a hurley, a baseball bat, and various other weapons. The hurley could indicate that this is a Republican paramilitary group, but Murphy emphasised when promoting the film that the filmmakers did not intend to produce yet another film about the 'troubles.'

Meanwhile the first couple past the border (they are from the North) are also hospitalised when their high-speed chase with the Gardaí ends up in an horrific car crash. Using a similar symmetry, Murphy has the two eccentric couples (one from the North, the other from the South) wandering around safely but out of the race.

Having worked as an actor and director for many years, and more recently with youth drama in Dublin, it could be argued that Murphy was trying to address a side of Irish life that is often ignored. There are disillusioned teenagers who do not see much of a future for themselves in modern Ireland and decide to live for the moment. From the outset of the film, it is apparent that Whacker, Johnny T's Dublin rival (in love and racing), is extremely disturbed and alienated. His self-destructive behaviour is foreshadowed by several actions early in the film, including carrying a handgun on the train to Belfast and indulging in a high-speed race with Johnny T.

When they both approach the border they are stopped at an army checkpoint. This moment provides a central turning point for the film when Whacker brandishes his gun and shouts out: "Shoot to kill motherfuckers!" Johnny's sister, Boo, is wounded in the subsequent exchange of gunfire. The three and Whacker's girlfriend, Louise, go to the hospital to get treatment for Boo. They have to leave when security forces appear, and so begins the final race to the border. Whacker appears to have accepted his fate, and when the army helicopter starts to close in on them, he forces Johnny and Louise to leave (with the prize money, now tainted by blood), while he has his final showdown with the soldiers.

The problem with this film is revealed in these scenes at the border when Whacker ends up being riddled with army bullets. It starts out as an action adventure film aimed at a youth audience, then it descends into a grim conclusion as the only two youths left standing have to wade across a river to free themselves of the problem(s) of the North. But the images that remain with the audience at the end of the film are of the victims, the hospitalised, the lost, even the bloodstained Whacker, all of whom have been damaged by entering this borderland terrain. If Johnny T and Louise have any future, it is in Barcelona, far away from this landscape.

Landscape is a key element in Johnny Gogan's *The Mapmaker*, a suspense thriller set in a border town in the North of Ireland. Revisiting the subject of place and identity, Gogan shows how a geographical location can have multiple interpretations and histories that are connected to the power relationships of a border community. As Penning-Rowell notes,

Landscapes [...] carry symbolic meanings that are not so wholly innocent as might at first be thought. Created landscapes can be assertions of power – over nature or over neighbours – and our cognition of landscapes is selective and sometimes deliberately distorted in the pursuit of our own interests. (Penning-Rowell 115)

The problems that arise in the fractured community of a border town are mediated by the appearance of the main character, the mapmaker. As an outsider, the mapmaker, Richie Markey, attempts to make sense of the events that develop from the present and a troubled history. Hallam and Marshment observe that this type of character is often used in thriller films. The audience encounters

[a]n outsider whose character serves as a point of alignment in relation to a situation with which they are assumed to be unfamiliar. [...] audiences need a point of entry into a situation which is provided by a character more like themselves than the subject of the film. (Hallam & Marshment 156)

By making a Southern Quaker the protagonist of his film, Gogan has decided to create an 'outsider' whose fundamental belief is that of 'bearing witness.' The idea of being a witness to events that unfold is central to the film. In *Richie*, we encounter a protagonist who appears to happen upon events, rather than take direct action himself. He is also treading in his grandfather's footsteps, a man who was part of a boundary commission that decided on the path of the Irish border in the 1920s.

Throughout the film *Richie* expresses anxiety about the claims that his grandfather was the man who leaked the commission's decisions to the press and so in turn may have been a traitor. However, it is not only his own relative that haunts him; he becomes involved in the story of Peter Nolan, a man who was abducted over a decade earlier but whose body was never found. He strikes up a friendship with the man's son, who is called 'Cub' and who assumes that *Richie* has arrived in the town to use his map-making technology to find Peter's body.

The film strikes an uneven tone from the outset, featuring a po-faced voiceover that sets the scene (undoubtedly for an audience unfamiliar with the situation) with references to his “reading optimistic things about the border country opening up.” However the following lines provide the key to the film’s central mysteries: “old wars are like old lovers, their ghosts hang around long after the guns have gone silent.”

Ghosts permeate the film: Richie’s grandfather, Peter Nolan, and a murdered RUC officer called Dawson Cooper. Cooper’s sister Jane and her husband Robert are members of the committee who hire Richie to make the map. Tension arises between the two men when the mapmaker finds archaeological remains on farmland and secures an injunction preventing destruction of the site by Robert’s forestry team.

Richie reveals himself as being more aligned with the landscape than with particular communities and tries to stay apart from the men in the local pub. The influence of frontier mythology also seeps into *The Mapmaker* when some of the forestry team, who are shown to be Loyalists, enter the ‘saloon’ and have a showdown (albeit verbal) with the Republican regulars. This tone gives way to suspense when Richie stumbles upon Peter Nolan’s skeleton while walking the land as he works on his map. But while Richie affords closure for the Nolan family, he himself cannot shut out the problems that arise from his discovery. Unseen forces leave him a copy of Peter Nolan’s ‘confession’ tape. During this interrogation Nolan is accused of being a spy for the British, but he insists that he was merely guiding an archaeological team around the sites in the area.

In a morbid twist, the mapmaker uses the confession tape to draw his map. As Cub says, his father knew the “country better than any book,” and so Richie uses this knowledge of place names to create the map. Jane rebukes him for using a “dead man’s words” to bring the map to life. But we find that nothing is as it seems in this border town. The film collapses in on itself as the format fails to hold the narrative together. We learn that, in a sense, Jane instigated Peter’s death, because she wanted revenge for the loss of her brother Dawson. She felt that someone had to be killed in retaliation: an eye for an eye. We discover that her husband Robert also benefited from Peter’s death. When the archaeologists left, the forestry team were able to continue to tear up the land which Robert describes as a “heap of barren earth,” a quote that reveals his affinity with destruction. Richie almost ends up becoming an informer himself when he telephones the RUC chief Devlin to tell him what he has learned, but when no one answers, he is finally forced to take action himself.

There are many flaws in *The Mapmaker*, yet it is a very rich text. It attempts to engage with ideas of *dinnseanchas*, or place names, concepts that were also addressed in Brian Friel’s *Translations* and are a frequent feature of Irish poetry in Irish and English. The question of whether southern Irish film directors (see O’Rawe) have the ability to deal adequately with the fragmented nature of a border community is not resolved by *The Mapmaker*. Despite an attempt to introduce an alternative character to mediate events for the audience, Gogan is not capable of overcoming the stereo-

type that there is only one division in society in the North of Ireland. Joe Cleary notes that since the 1970s

[t]he partition of Ireland no longer stopped at the inter-state border: the militarization of local territorial boundaries and the increased segregation of its two communities have effectively produced a whole series of internal partitions within Northern Ireland. (Cleary 101)

One notable success of the film is the cinematography that mirrors the work of David Farrell's *Innocent Landscapes*. In both texts the camera records an absence. Through Owen MacPóilín's camera-work, the landscape itself becomes a character in the film. As the light changes, the shadows stretch across the verdant and rich hills, suggesting a sinister presence hidden in the half-light.

Just as Farrell's work had an influence on the screen images of *Mapmaker*, the final film under consideration here is also deeply connected to the search for the disappeared. *Limbo* (2001) is a short film written and directed by Anne Crilly. This relatively recent film reflects on a number of issues that arose in the aftermath of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. It is a meditation on motherhood and the denial of closure for people who have suffered the loss of a family member. As a maternal narrative, it seems to be a more successful interrogation of the effects of the 'Troubles' than the other films, by choosing to focus on the families' need for resolution following the trauma of bereavement (be it from 'punishment' or abduction or that of a still-born child).

It tells the story of Carmel, a woman from Derry whose baby boy was stillborn. He was buried on unconsecrated ground because of Catholic church policy. The film deals with her attempts at reconciliation with the past. One day, she sees a news report about Seán Ó Cinnéide, who disappeared in the mid-1970s. New information has come to light about the whereabouts of his body, so a dig is underway on the Donegal coastline to search for his remains. Carmel, who is a regular visitor to this area, decides to approach Seán's mother, Eileen, and express her support.

The border is not visible in this film, but in a way this invisibility makes sense. These abductions and disappearances took place across the border; therefore the resolution of the issues that arise from this must also traverse the borderlands. The brief friendship between the two women provides solace for Carmel, who says little during her meetings with Eileen. It is left to Eileen to express what is affecting both of them: "Cén mháthair nár mhaith léi adhlacadh ceart a thabhairt dá pháiste" ("What mother wouldn't want to give a proper burial to her child?").

Eileen says it is like being in a continual wake, a state of limbo, and that she will not have peace ("suaimhneas") until her son is at rest. Carmel has experienced a similar loss and is unable to grieve properly because of the denial of closure. Even when the search is unsuccessful, Eileen says that although Seán's body has not been found, she feels that she now has a resting place to envisage when she thinks of him rather

than the blank limbo that existed before. Carmel now realises that she wants to be able to imagine a similar place of rest for her dead son. Her husband warns her against digging up the past, but she echoes Eileen's comment by saying she wants some picture in her head of the place where her young child was buried. With a priest, they go to an unmarked grave in the hills (it resembles another site for the disappeared), and after a brief blessing the priest leaves saying that limbo no longer exists. Carmel is stunned to hear this, but the ceremony affords her the opportunity to express her grief.

Crilly manages to weave together the different experiences of two mothers. She makes a powerful statement as she draws uncanny comparisons between the Catholic Church and paramilitaries. Both hurt many families by denying them the expression of grief associated with a Christian burial. As a maternal narrative, *Limbo* is strikingly different from the other films discussed above. By adopting a personal approach, the director (like Margo Harkin in *Hush-A-Bye-Baby*) has created a personal film. This enables her to meditate upon the impact of the troubles in a way that avoids the idea of a 'divided community' or other stereotypes that posit an inherently violent people and landscape in Ireland, especially in the North. It would do other filmmakers good to note this approach, as the tendency towards creating a macroscopic view of conflict can rarely avoid the idea that Ireland is afflicted by "the bleeding sore that is Northern Ireland" (McLoone 135).

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